

Hannah K. Easley. Difficulty vs. Engagement: An Analysis of Easy Readers About Superheroes and Their Amazon.com Reviews. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. May, 2014. 49 pages. Advisor: Brian Sturm

This study analyzes twelve easy reader titles featuring superheroes and their corresponding product reviews on Amazon.com. Titles were examined for difficulty based on language and design features, and the results were compared to assessments made by reviewers on Amazon.com. The study found that reviewers commonly reported use of these easy readers as read aloud material for pre-reading children. Reviewers who indicated use of the book as independent reading material commented on difficulty more often than those who described the book as read aloud material. Series that this study assigned overall higher difficulty scores had comparatively more uses as read aloud material than those that received lower difficulty scores. A content analysis of the Amazon.com reviews revealed that evaluations tended to center on four categories: difficulty, engagement, appropriateness, and female role models. The results of this study may be useful for children's librarians and teachers when considering superhero easy readers for their collections.

#### Headings:

Children – Books & reading

Readability (Literary style)

Science fiction

DIFFICULTY VS ENGAGEMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF EASY READERS ABOUT  
SUPERHEROES AND THEIR AMAZON.COM REVIEWS

by  
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Approved by

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Brian Sturm

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Literature Review.....	5
Easy readers.....	5
Evaluating Difficulty.....	6
Methods.....	10
Easy Reader Data Collection.....	10
Amazon.com Review Data Collection.....	11
Limitations.....	13
Results.....	15
Easy Reader Content Analysis.....	15
Amazon.com Review Content Analysis.....	21
Conclusions and Discussion.....	37
References.....	40
Appendices.....	44
Appendix A.....	44
Appendix B.....	46

## **Introduction**

Superheroes are everywhere. You can find them in movies, television shows, and their native comics. You can see them on t-shirts, fast food cups, theme park rides and used car advertisements. They crowd the action figure aisle in any toy store and come to school on lunch boxes and light-up shoes. Though many popular superheroes were originally created for older audiences, their adventures have been successfully adapted into picture books and television shows for young children. In recent years, the number of easy readers featuring superheroes has dramatically increased, and more publishers are beginning to produce them. While these books have the potential to excite new readers, they also pose unique challenges to the rigidly structured format of the easy reader. Easy readers are books designed for children who are learning to read independently. Both the writing and the physical design of these books play a part to support beginning readers as they decode new words. Decoding is the process of using letter-sound relationships to read unfamiliar words. In easy readers, the writing typically features an emphasis on sight words and short sentences. Design elements like wide leading (the space between lines), large fonts and plentiful white space are intended to help novice readers whose eye muscles are not yet as well developed as those of adults. Pictures are included to provide context and aid in decoding.

Often, easy readers are leveled by difficulty. Higher leveled easy readers begin to resemble early chapter books, with longer stories, more text per page, fewer pictures, and increasingly complex words and plots. Leveling is not exact, however. Publishers have their own proprietary leveling systems, and educators can choose from a variety of systems to level the texts in their classrooms. Librarians often make choices about leveling when they organize their collections that are independent of any assigned leveling system.

Stories about superheroes, with their strange vocabularies and complicated plots, challenge many of the conventions of the easy reader format. Several educators and reviewers who work with texts for beginning readers stress the use of familiar concepts. In their book *Guided Reading: good first teaching for all children*, Fountas and Pinnell advise “at the lower levels especially, be sure that familiar topics are explored. A simply written book focusing on a large number of concepts that are well beyond some children’s experiences...is not really simple or easy” (1996, p.111.) In *From Cover to Cover*, her book outlining the evaluation of books for children, Horning writes: “more whimsical elements may be introduced if they are firmly rooted in a reality children will easily absorb (1997, p. 147).

This firm insistence on realism seems at odds with the popularity of superhero picture books and easy readers. The proliferation of titles within the past few years suggests that these books are profitable, and in the researcher’s experience these materials circulate well in public libraries. But it is problematic if superhero easy reader adaptations are appealing to beginning readers but too difficult for them to truly read independently. It is important for beginning readers to have positive, successful early

experiences with independent reading. Success builds motivation to continue reading, while repeated failures and difficulties can begin a cycle of decreasing motivation and achievement (Brown 1999). Fountas suggests that teachers ask of materials, “Is the text so difficult to process that children get no real opportunity to read?” (1996, p.5)

The primary purpose of this study is to compare an analysis of the difficulty of twelve superhero easy reader titles conducted by the researcher with the informal analysis of reviewers on Amazon.com. Three titles each were selected from four series of leveled readers: the I Can Read series from Harper Collins, Step into Reading from Random House, World of Reading from the Disney Book Group, and Passport to Reading from LB Kids. The study was guided by two research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between text difficulty and reviewers’ use of the easy readers?
2. What qualities did reviewers discuss in their assessments of the texts?

The results of this study, while not necessarily representative or generalizable, do illuminate some of the ways that caregivers and children are interacting with superhero easy readers. The data could be useful for librarians and educators who are collecting and recommending these texts for children.

## Literature Review

### Easy Readers

Easy readers as we know them first appeared in 1957, when Theodore Seuss Geisel published *The Cat in the Hat*. Geisel wrote the book in response to an article in Life Magazine by author John Hersey. Hersey suggested that the bland nature of schoolbooks populated by “abnormally courteous and unnaturally clean boys and girls” (a dig at *Dick and Jane*) was responsible for students’ failure to learn to read (Horning, 1997, p. 122). In response, Geisel used a limited vocabulary list to create *The Cat in the Hat*. The same year, Else Homelund Minarik’s *Little Bear* was published, the first book in Harper and Row’s “I Can Read” series.

The “I Can Read” series, published by Harper Collins, continues to be popular today. “I Can Read” books are divided into four levels, which are displayed prominently on the covers of the books. Within the last five years, Harper Collins has begun to publish “I Can Read” books that feature superheroes from the DC universe, including Batman, Wonder Woman and the Justice League. Harper Collins is not the only publisher creating easy readers that feature superheroes. Random House collaborated with DC Comics to create the DC Super Friends for its Step into Reading series. The World of Reading Series published by Marvel Press (a part of the Disney Book Group) and LB Kids’ Marvel Super Hero Squad both feature popular Marvel characters like Spiderman, the X-Men, and the Avengers. The Marvel Super Hero Squad readers are companions to a television show that features the same characters.

Children's book adaptations of popular television and movie characters are not new. In a 1999 study of children's reading preferences, Hall and Coles found that one in seven of the top 100 most popular books was either adapted from a film or television show, or had inspired a film or television adaptation. This study examined the reading preferences of middle school children, but checking the children's section of any library will reveal a plethora of books based on shows like Dora the Explorer and Scooby Doo. The popularity of these adaptations, including comic book adaptations, suggests that we could see even more of them in the future.

### **Evaluating Difficulty**

There is a large body of research in the education field on methods of determining text difficulty. The two main measures of determining difficulty are *readability*, a numerical score created by applying a formula to the text alone, and *leveling*, a method of grouping texts based on a variety of dimensions. Common examples of readability include the Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease Formula and Lexile reading levels. In his article "Readability Versus Leveling," Edward Fry outlines the similarities and differences between these methods of judging difficulty, and outlines the uses for each. One major advantage of a readability formula is its consistency and objectivity (2002).

Because readability formulas only evaluate text, there are many elements that they cannot measure, or that they might measure incorrectly. One part of the readability calculation involves measuring word length by either letters or syllables. Horning points out that short words are not necessarily easy ones (1997, p. 130). For example, "evil" is only a four letter word, but it is a difficult abstract concept. "Bedroom" is a longer word,



but it is a compound word made up of two common sight words, which aids in decoding. Leveling is a way to rate text difficulty that takes into account meaning as well as design factors like pictures and words per page. Leveling is more subjective than readability, and more time-consuming to determine. But it is also able to provide “finer gradations at the primary levels,” where readability formulas are sometimes not precise enough for the purposes of reading instruction (Fry 2002).

One leveling system commonly used by educators is the Fountas Pinnell system. Fountas and Pinnell created their system in response to a general shift in reading instruction in the 1990s. Classrooms moved from a heavy reliance on basal readers to an increased use of “authentic” literature in the classroom, and teachers needed a way of matching these texts with children at differing stages of learning to read (Hoffman, Roser, Salas, and Pennington, 2001). The Fountas Pinnell system levels books from A to M and is focused on the needs of reading teachers (Fountas, and Pinnell 1996). This system’s predictive validity has been supported by empirical research. Hoffman and his colleagues studied first-grade students and found that the Fountas Pinnell system accurately predicted the amount of difficulty with which these readers could decode texts (Hoffman et al, 2001). That study also supported the predictive validity of Hoffman’s STAS-1 method of measuring text difficulty.

Other methods of determining difficulty have also been empirically tested, including Hiebert and Fisher’s Critical Word Factor. Critical Word Factor is based on the number of words in a text that fall outside a given curriculum. It accurately predicts difficulty, but can only be calculated in relation to a specific curriculum or school system (Hiebert and Fisher, 2007). The research appears to show that the leveling systems with

the highest predictive validity are those developed by and intended for use by educators. Publisher-assigned levels, the levels most likely to be encountered by parents and librarians, can vary widely in their formulation and consistency.

Several studies document significant variations within publisher leveling systems, and between the leveling systems used by different publishers. In her master's paper *A Content Analysis Study of the Equivalency of Publishers' Easy Reader Leveling Systems*, Pierce compared the leveling systems of Harper Collins, Random House and Simon & Schuster. She found that the leveling systems were not consistent between publishers. For example, a level 2 Harper Collins book corresponded to a level 3 Random House book (Pierce 2012).

In their study "Sequential Art Books and Beginning Readers: can the pictures help decode the words?" Stanley and Sturm analyzed graphic novels by several publishers that were marketed for beginning readers. They looked for direct relationships between images and words to determine if the images could help struggling readers to decode the text. Visual literacy develops earlier than print literacy (Stanley and Sturm, 2008) and pictures can be a valuable resource for beginning readers. They found that the number of images with a direct relationship to the text varied significantly between the graphic novels, even between those written by the same author.

Pitcher and Fang analyzed leveled "little books" published by the Wright Group and found that books within each of the four levels had inconsistencies in the percentage of high-frequency words used. They also found significant variations in quality both within and between levels. They concluded that "close attention to levels could be detrimental to the reader-text matching process" (Pitcher and Fang, 2007).

Dzaldov and Peterson also question an over-reliance on leveling systems in their study “Book Leveling and Readers.” They analyzed books in several classrooms organized by the Fountas Pinnell system, and found that the books were leveled consistently, and that a wide variety of content was available in each level. However, they question “leveling mania” in education, and caution teachers to ensure that they are including texts that speak to students from diverse backgrounds (Dzaldov and Peterson, 2005).

The research appears to show that easy readers can be leveled in ways that accurately predict difficulty, but that level alone should not be used to determine the appropriateness of a text for a particular child. This is especially true for publisher assigned levels, which the evidence suggests are less accurate than levels created by educators. Since publisher levels are proprietary, it is not possible to examine the criteria used to create them.

Though several experts mention the benefits of texts that explore topics familiar to beginning readers (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996, Horning, 1997), there does not appear to be any empirical research on the effects of science fiction and fantasy elements on young children’s reading comprehension. Many easy readers contain fantasy elements. Stories featuring anthropomorphic animals are very common. *Little Bear* and *Frog and Toad*, for example, are well-known staples of the format. Many stories even introduce a sudden fantastic situation, such as the sudden appearance of a dinosaur in Syd Hoff’s *Danny and the Dinosaur*. Perhaps there is a difference between that sort of fantasy (Danny’s dinosaur engages in typical, familiar childhood activities) and the highly detailed alternate realities of superhero stories.

## Methods

### Easy Reader Data Collection

This study examined titles from series by four different publishers: I Can Read from Harper Collins, Step into Reading from Random House, World of Reading from Disney Book Group, and Passport to Reading from LB Kids. Since studies have reported significant variance between publisher assigned levels (Pitcher and Fang 2007) three titles from each publisher were examined. For each series, the three books with the most Amazon.com reviews were selected for analysis. The number of reviews per book varied, ranging from 58 reviews for Passport to Reading's *Meet the Super Hero Squad* to 9 reviews for Step into Reading's *Brain Freeze*.

For the evaluation of the books themselves, this study adapted the data collection tool used by Dzaldov and Peterson in their study of leveled texts (2005). Because the researchers in that study were also comparing texts within levels, the assessment was well suited to this study. Some questions were changed slightly based on Pierce's data collection instrument, used in her comparison of publishers' leveling systems (2013). The data collection instrument used in this study is included in Appendix A.

Each book was coded according to a series of design features and language and literary features. A numerical score was assigned to each book for every question on the data collection instrument, and in the end the scores were added to produce the final difficulty score. A lower score indicated lower difficulty, and a higher score indicated higher difficulty.

### **Amazon.com Review Data Collection**

The collection instrument developed to analyze the Amazon.com reviews is included in Appendix B. Each review did not necessarily address all questions on the collection instrument. Reviews were included in the analysis if they referred to the easy reader being analyzed, and if they addressed any of the questions on the collection instrument. Some reviews were excluded because they referred to the wrong item. For example, some reviews of the Marvel Super Hero Squad readers described the television show instead of the book. A handful of reviews were excluded because they discussed only the delivery and condition of the books. Reviews of the paperback and kindle versions of the stories were considered together. Some reviews of kindle versions of the books were excluded because they referred exclusively to the book's display in the e-reader format.

This study employed the qualitative method of content analysis and emergent coding to extract data from Amazon.com reviews. Wildemuth defines the qualitative method as one that “allows themes to emerge from the data throughout the process of analysis: the coding framework is continually shaped by emerging information (298). Most of the coding categories were identified before the analysis began, but the categories relating to story (Engagement, Violence, Scariness, Values, and Female Role Models) emerged as the reviews were analyzed. The coding for Difficulty did not originally reflect positive and negative comments, but was refined after coding the first group of reviews.

First, a chart was developed that contained ten units of analysis. Next, each review was examined and relevant data were collected. The URL address of each review

was recorded, for easy reference to the original text. In the initial stages, any comment or phrase deemed relevant to any of the thematic units of analysis was recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Manifest content like the age of children and star rating were coded immediately. For areas that a review did not address, the field was left blank.

In the next phase of analysis, codes were developed and applied based on the units analyzed. The codes that emerged in this study fell in to four categories: difficulty, engagement, appropriateness, and female role models.

Comments on difficulty were coded in four categories: Simple Positive, Simple Negative, Difficult Positive and Difficult Negative. Simple Positive comments were the most common. Reviews that indicated that books were too basic or simple for the child in question were coded Simple Negative. Comments were coded as Difficult Positive when the difficulty of the text was presented in a favorable way. One reviewer of *The Mighty Avengers* in the World of Reading series wrote: “a little more than a beginner, but a great challenge.” Another wrote: “words are more level 2 reader,” which was coded as Difficult Negative.

For the engagement category, the codes “Engaging” and “Not Engaging” were used. For this study, engagement with the story and engagement with the pictures were coded separately. Because many ambiguous responses were excluded, it is likely that more reviewers meant to express engagement than were counted in the study. For example, the comment “he loves the story” was coded as Engaging. But for another review, “he loves it” was not coded, because it was unclear whether the child loved the pictures, the story, or even the book itself because it was a gift from a loved one.

Many reviews concentrated on the themes of superhero easy readers and their appropriateness for young children. Three dimensions were determined to fall under the category of Appropriateness: Violence, Scariness, and Values. Responses were coded as Scary or Not Scary, Non Violent, and Positive Values. The codes Negative Values and Violent were not necessary, because no reviewers reported that the books were violent or that they contained negative values. Those comments that did discuss negative values all fell under the separate category of Female Role Models.

Comments about female superheroes and their representation were coded as Positive Female Role Model or Negative Female Role Model. Responses for story and illustrations were coded separately. Comments about female heroes were given a separate category from Values because reviews discussed the significance of female heroes' iconography and actions in a way that was very specific, and very different from the way male heroes were discussed. The two reviews that commented on male heroes as being good role models in a broader, more general way were coded as statements about Positive Values.

Several days after the codes were assigned, they were reviewed for consistency. Finally, the coded data were analyzed and the results compiled.

## **Limitations**

This study has many limitations. Some of its limitations are related to the inherent subjectivity of qualitative content analysis. The analysis of Amazon.com reviews relied on indicators of latent content, and there were many opportunities for bias when interpreting the results. Though multiple coders have been shown to increase the

reliability of content analysis (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 301), this study was coded by a single researcher. With only one person coding responses, there was no way of establishing consistency or intercoder reliability.

Because the study examined book reviews on a seller's website, the sample only includes opinions from individuals who purchased a copy of the book and who felt strongly enough to write a review. The opinions of those who used the books in schools or libraries, or borrowed them from others, are excluded. Because the reviews were written (with only one visible exception) by adults, the opinions of any child readers were filtered and colored by the opinion of the adult recording the review. The results of this study can be considered neither representative of nor generalizable to a wider population of users of superhero easy readers.

The coding of the easy reader texts also involved subjectivity. Since these texts were also coded by a single researcher, there was much less of an opportunity to minimize bias and check consistency. Though the data collection tool was based on tools used in previous studies, small changes were made. Because of the changes, a direct comparison between the numerical scores of the texts is not possible, but a more general comparison might be.



## Results

### Content Analysis of Easy Readers

Each easy reader was examined for indicators of difficulty in its text, design, and language features. A numerical value from one to three was assigned for each feature, and the results were added to produce a final difficulty score. The series with the lowest average difficulty score was World of Reading (15.3), followed by Step into Reading (17.6), I Can Read (21), and finally Passport to Reading (23?).

Some features were very similar across all four series. All of the books analyzed were sixteen pages long. Though print size varied between series, within each series the print size and line spacing were consistent. The art style within each series was also consistent, and each had a distinct stylistic feel.

### World of Reading.

Books in the World of Reading series received the lowest difficulty scores, with an average total score of 15.3. Each book had a publisher rating of Level 1. All three use 18pt. font and have defined spacing between each line. The books are written in the present tense, using simple declarative sentences. *This is Spider-Man* and *These are the Avengers* use only periods as punctuation. *This is Iron Man* uses mostly periods, but contains a single exclamation mark. *This is Spider-Man* and *This is Iron Man* are both written from a single point of view, while *These are the Avengers* contains the point of view of each of the Avengers.

The simple sentences and punctuation, absence of literary devices and complementary picture relationships in the World of Reading books all contributed to low difficulty scores. These books functioned as descriptive introductions to each character, and did not have story arcs that involved a confrontation with a villain.

### **Step into Reading.**

The Step into Reading books received the second lowest overall difficulty scores, with an average of 17.6. *Brain Freeze* and *T. Rex Trouble* both have publisher assigned levels of 2. *Flying High* is a Level 1 book, but actually received a slightly higher difficulty score in this study because of the relationship between its illustrations and text. These books used 30pt. font, and had the largest font size of the four series studied. They are written in the present tense.

All three books in this series used periods and frequent exclamation points. *Brain Freeze* and *T-Rex trouble* also include dialogue between characters, unlike the books in the World of Reading Series, and use quotation marks. All three books follow the adventures of the Super Friends, and show scenes from the point of view of each hero.

Because *Flying High* was classified by the publisher as a Level 1 book, it was expected to receive a lower difficulty score than the Level 2 books in the Step into Reading series. In this study, it received a higher difficulty score. It is possible that the text is slightly easier: *Flying High* does not include dialogue or quotation marks. The illustrations are what caused the book to receive a higher score. In *Flying High* the text overlaps with the illustrations on all pages of text, a factor considered to increase difficulty because beginning readers may have trouble following the text or

distinguishing the letters from the pictures. *Flying High* also included primarily enhancing picture-text relationships, rather than complimentary ones. Most of the pictures in this book added additional information to the text, rather than simply reflecting it.

Simple sentences and lack of figurative language contributed to the fairly low difficulty scores of books in the Step into Reading series. The stories in this series were slightly more complicated than the ones in World of Reading. Each story featured a conflict between the Super Friends and a different villain.

### **I Can Read.**

Books in the I Can Read series were significantly more difficult than ones in the World of Reading or Step into Reading series, featuring longer sentences and more complicated plots. The I Can Read series received an average difficulty score of 21, and each book had a publisher assigned level of 2. These books used a 22pt font size and had clear spacing between lines, but featured more lines per page than the previous two series. Most pages had between four and six lines, while the maximum number of lines per page in the World of Reading or Step into Reading series was three. Books in the I Can Read series are written in the past tense.

Stories in the I Can Read series also featured more complicated language than the previous two series. All three used dialogue extensively, and featured more complicated interactions between the characters. For example, in *Brain Freeze* in the Step into Reading series, the Super Friends do not communicate with one another while battling Mr. Freeze. In *Batman: Meet the Super Heroes*, Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman

speak to each other and form a strategy as they fight a magic dragon. Some figurative language is used in these stories, for example, in *I am Wonder Woman*, Wonder Woman moves “as fast as lightning” (Stein 11).

The structure of stories in the I Can Read series is also more complicated. These stories employ shifts in location. For example, in *I am Superman*, Superman takes Lois Lane to the fortress of Solitude, describes his origins on Krypton and his early life, then returns to Metropolis to fight Lex Luthor. In the Step into Reading series, all of the stories took place in a fairly contained location, such as a single street in *T. Rex Trouble*.

Use of descriptive language, multiple perspectives, and layered plotlines all contributed to the overall higher difficulty score of books in the I Can Read series.

### **Passport to Reading.**

Books in the Passport to Reading series received the highest difficulty scores, with an average score of 21. All three were listed as Level 2 by the publisher. These books used 15pt. font, and had the smallest font and line spacing of the four series studied. As in books in the I Can Read Series, most pages contained between four and six lines.

Books in the Passport to Reading series used a variety of punctuation marks, including periods, exclamation marks, and quotation marks. While many sentences were simple declaratives, compound and complex sentence structures were also used. For example, one complex sentence in *Captain America to the Rescue* reads “When the sun went down, he knew it was almost time for the fireworks show to begin” (Rosen, 9). This is very different from the sentence structures used in books with lower difficulty

scores. Books in the World of Reading and Step into Reading series used only simple sentences. Books in the Passport to Reading series also used figurative language.

All of the stories in the Passport to Reading series employed multiple points of view. In *Captain America to the Rescue*, the story alternates between the point of view of the Super Hero Squad and the villain Dormammu. *Meet the Super Hero Squad* and *Meet the Villains of Villainville* are both descriptive introductions to the characters, and describe each of the characters in the series. Books in the Passport to Reading series featured more characters than books in any other series.

Small print size and line spacing, complex sentence structures and multiple points of view all contributed to Passport to Reading's overall high difficulty score.

### **A Comparison Across Series.**

Many factors contributed to the difficulty scores of each book analyzed. Interestingly, books in the simplest and most difficult series were very structurally similar. Each book in the World of Reading series was an introduction to a character or characters and did not feature a typical conflict or storyline. *Meet the Super Hero Squad* and *Meet the Villains of Villainville* in the Passport to Reading series were also character introductions, but their complex language and small print size contributed to a much higher difficulty score. Table 1 contains a chart comparing each book's total difficulty score. After the easy readers were analyzed, reviews for each book were examined to determine if difficulty had any relationship to reviewers' use of the books.

Table 1: Easy Reader Difficulty Scores

Title	Author	Series	Book and Text Score	Language and Literary Score	Total Score	Publisher Level	Female Superheroes present ?
This is Spider-Man	Thomas Macri	World of Reading	10	4	14	1	No
This is Iron Man	Thomas Macri	World of Reading	11	5	16	1	No
These are the Avengers	Thomas Macri	World of Reading	10	6	16	1	Yes
DC Super Friends: Brain Freeze!	J. E. Bright	Step into Reading	11	6	17	2	No
DC Super Friends: T.Rex Trouble!	Dennis Shealy	Step into Reading	12	5	17	2	No
DC Super Friends: Flying High!	Nick Eliopoulos	Step into Reading	14	5	19	1	No
Batman: Meet the Super Heroes	Michael Teitelbaum	I Can Read	14	8	22	2	Yes
Wonder Woman: I am Wonder Woman	Erin K. Stein	I Can Read	14	7	21	2	Yes
Superman: I am Superman	Michael Teitelbaum	I Can Read	14	6	20	2	No
Super Hero Squad: Meet the Super Heroes!	Lucy Rosen	Passport to Reading	15	9	24	2	Yes
Super Hero Squad: Meet the Villains of Villainville!	Lucy Rosen	Passport to Reading	14	8	22	2	Yes
Super Hero Squad: Captain America to the Rescue!	Lucy Rosen	Passport to Reading	15	8	23	2	No

## **Content Analysis of Amazon.com Reviews**

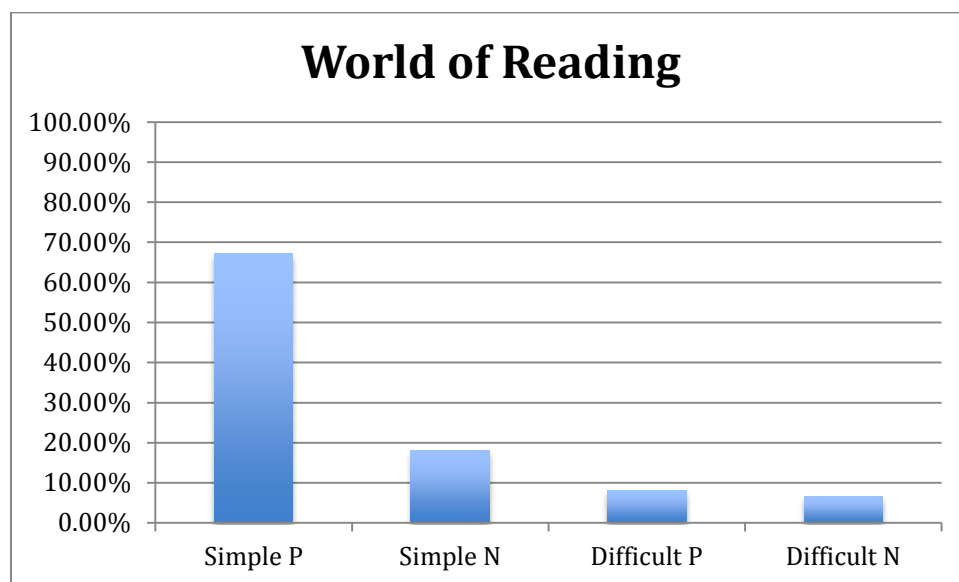
Analysis of the 334 reviews revealed a spectrum of uses for the texts and many methods of evaluation. Reviewers discussed using the easy readers as bedtime stories, tutoring materials, independent reading, companions to television shows, and more. The age of children engaging with the books ranged from 1.5 to 10 years old, with 4 being the most commonly reported age. The children described were overwhelmingly male, with 81% of reviews that specified the sex of the child reporting male children. Forty-five percent of reviews discussed difficulty as a factor in the evaluation of the text, but difficulty emerged as only one of several factors that were important to reviewers. A major consideration was simply the presence of superheroes. Forty-five percent of reviews discussed the child's existing interest in superheroes as a primary reason for the purchase of, or enjoyment of, the story. Though the reviews varied in their focus and their wording, four key themes emerged across all four series: difficulty, engagement, thematic appropriateness, and female role models.

### **World of Reading.**

Difficulty was a key consideration for many reviewers of World of Reading books. Sixty one percent of reviews for books in this series discussed difficulty, the highest percentage of all four series. About 66% of reviews discussing difficulty made positive comments about the texts' simplicity. Though the majority of reviews for this series made positive comments about simplicity, World of Reading actually had the lowest percentage of Simple Positive comments out of all four series. It had the highest percentage of Simple Negative comments, and the second highest percentage of Difficult

comments, after the I Can Read series. Table 2 illustrates the breakdown of comments on difficulty for the World of Reading series.

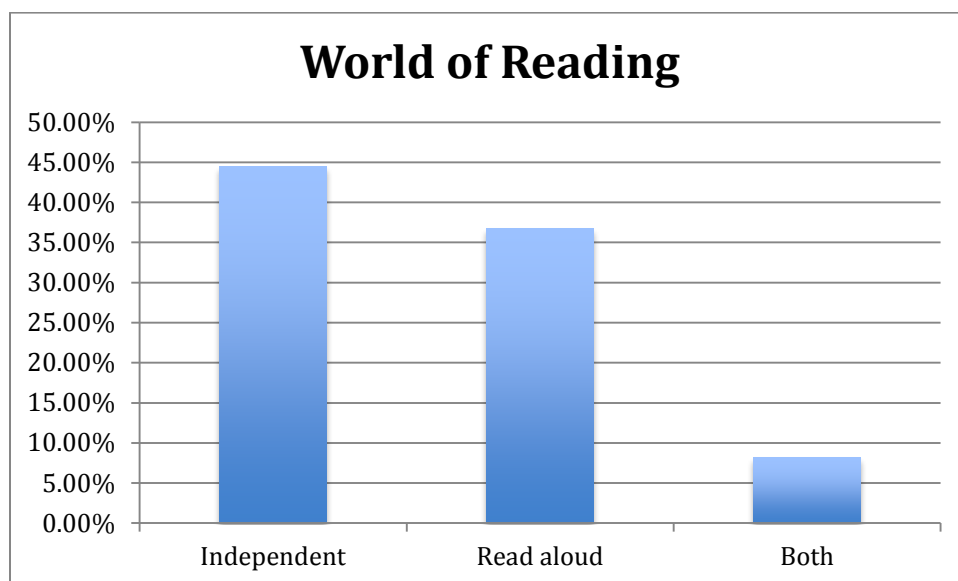
Table 2:



It is possible World of Reading books' slightly lower percentage of Simple Positive comments, and slightly higher percentage of Difficult comments can be explained by the ways reviewers were using the books. About 45% of reviewers reported that they were using World of Reading books as independent reading material for beginning readers.



Table 3:



It could be that more reviewers considered these books difficult because they were being read by beginning readers, rather than being read aloud. This hypothesis is supported by data gathered about the age of children using the books. Books in the World of Reading series had a slightly higher median age than the other series, 4.5 compared to 4. Five was the most commonly reported age, compared to 4 for the other series. Reviewers using World of Reading books with beginning readers could be judging difficulty using different criteria than reviewers using the books as read alouds for pre-reading children.

The high percentage of Simple Negative comments in comparison to other series could also be explained by the difference between independent reading and reading aloud. Many reviews that commented negatively on simplicity claimed that the books were too short. While short sentences and short books can be beneficial to beginning

readers, they do not necessarily make for interesting read alouds or challenging material for more advanced readers.

Engagement was another dimension that many reviewers discussed, and in some ways it appeared to be related to difficulty. Nineteen percent of reviews of World of Reading books discussed engagement with either the pictures or the story. In some cases, children found the material engaging but it was too difficult to read. One teacher who reviewed *This is Spider-Man* wrote that her “class was stimulated and excited by the cover,” but that the “words were too hard for beginning readers” (Stephie, 2013). Other reviewers wrote that a child’s interest in the material helped them persevere even when the material was difficult. A reviewer of *This is Iron Man* wrote ““My son is able to make out some of the words and his enthusiasm for the Avengers characters gives him the extra incentive to try harder and figure out the rest” (Anonymous, 2013).

The short, simple stories in the World of Reading series were not considered engaging at all by other reviewers. One reviewer of *This is Spider-Man* gave the book one star, and wrote that his three-year-old son kept asking: “Where is the Spider-Man?” (Smith, 2013). It appears that these superhero easy readers are serving two very different functions: as independent reading material and as read aloud material, and that in some cases these two functions conflict.

Since there are very few stories about superheroes that are written for young children, difficulty was not necessarily the main consideration for many reviewers. Reviewers of books in the World of Reading series also cited non-violence, a lack of scary story elements, and positive values as elements that contributed to their assessment of the stories. Violence is usually an integral part of superhero stories for older

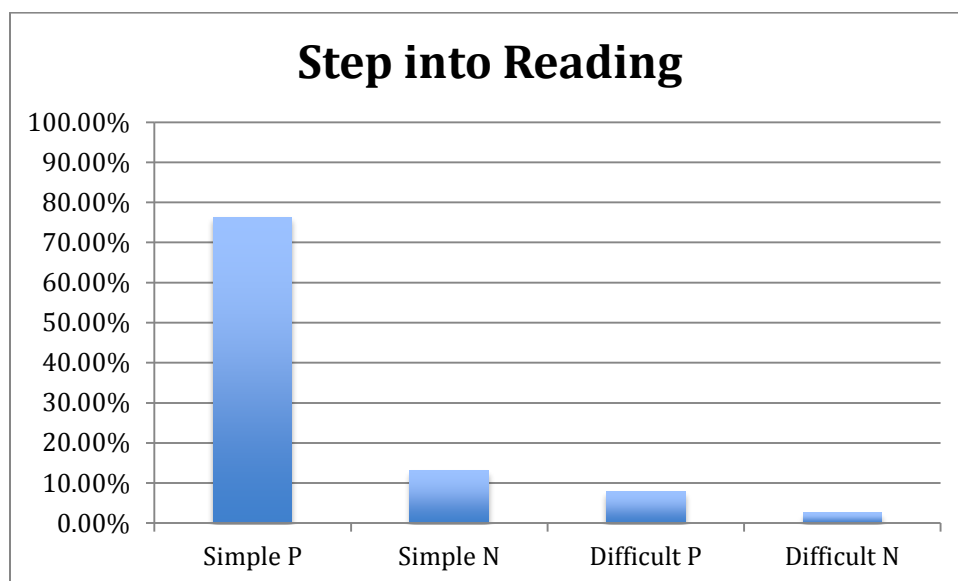
audiences. Often an act of violence is what triggers the transformation from ordinary person to hero, and both Spider-Man and Iron Man have bloody origins. Not surprisingly, they were omitted in these easy readers. Instead of detailing Tony Stark's near-fatal injury at the hands of a militant Chinese faction and the subsequent invention of the Iron Man suit, *This is Iron Man* simply says: "Tony wears a disk. It keeps him alive. He made the disk" (Macri, 12).

No reviewers of World of Reading books mentioned female role models. The only female hero to appear in the books analyzed was Wasp, Ant-Man's partner in *These are the Avengers*.

### **Step into Reading.**

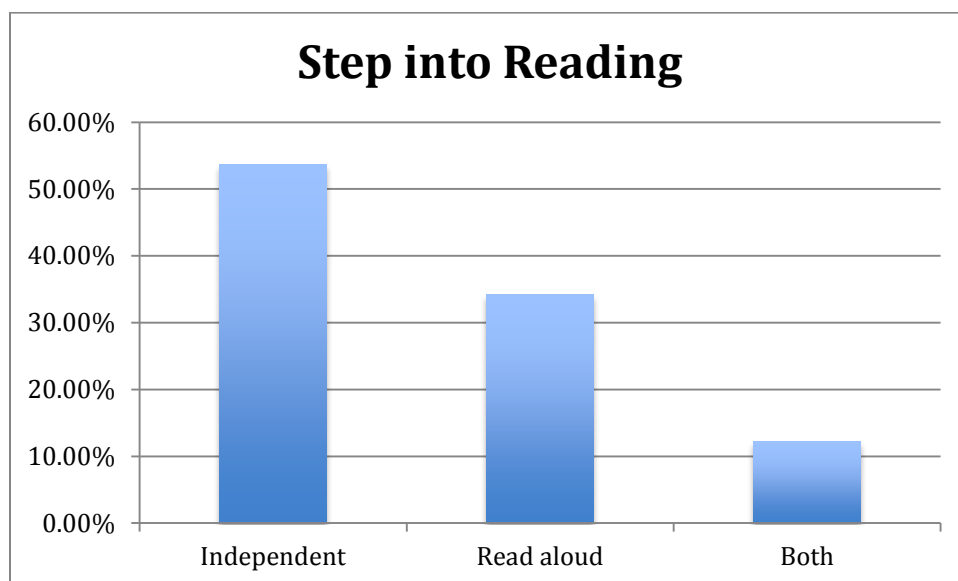
As with the World of Reading series, difficulty was an important factor for reviewers of books in Random House's Step into Reading series. Fifty eight percent of reviews of Step into Reading books discussed difficulty. While most reviewers commented positively on simplicity, books in the Step into Reading series had the second highest percentage of reviews coded Simple Negative, after World of Reading. It appears that responses for the two simplest series follow a similar pattern: both have a higher percentage of comments about difficulty and a greater percentage of comments coded Simple Negative than the two more difficult series.

Table 4:



Sixty-two percent of reviews for books in the Step into Reading series specified whether the book was used as independent reading, as a read aloud, or as both. Fifty-three percent of reviews that specified use reported the use of Step into Reading books as independent reading material. As with books in the World of Reading series, a greater percentage of reviews stated that the books were used for independent reading than for reading aloud. The percent difference is slightly more pronounced in the Step into Reading series.

Table 5:



Reviewers again expressed differing opinions about engagement. Twenty-six percent of reviews for books in the Step into Reading series discussed engagement. Of those reviews, 59% reported that the books were engaging, and 41% reported that they were not engaging. Story length was again commonly reported as a reason for lack of engagement with the story. One reviewer of *Flying High* explicitly commented on the book's use as a read aloud versus independent reading material. The reviewer had used the text as a read aloud and reported that it was not engaging, but added that the text would be useful as independent reading material. "This one is extremely short and not much happens.... I do think it will be good when they are learning to read themselves vs us reading to them, so we'll hang on to it till then" (Elara, 2012).

More reviewers commented on scariness for books in the Step into Reading series than any other series. Reviewers differentiated between scary story elements and scary illustrations. One reviewer of *Brain Freeze* wrote: "The story is not overly scary but Mr.

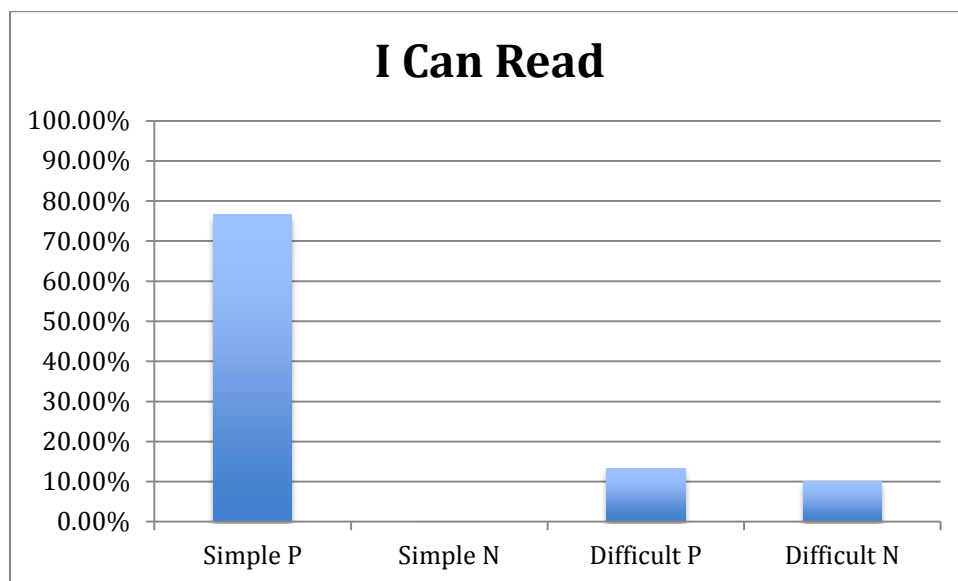
Freeze (the bad guy) is pretty scary looking. We avoid reading this before bed because it has led to some bad guy nightmares” (Midwest Mom, 2013). Another reviewer wrote that *T. Rex Trouble* was a little too scary for his or her family. Unlike books in the World of Reading series, books in the Step into Reading series feature conflict between the heroes and villains. Despite this, no reviewers stated that they felt the books to be violent. Several reviewers commented on non-violence and teamwork as a positive value that the books endorsed.

The Step into Reading series was the only series that did not contain any female heroes. All five members of the Super Friends are male. The publisher information provided on Amazon.com for this series describes the books as “leveled readers for boys ages 4-6.” One reviewer with a female child wrote about the lack of any female heroes in *Flying High*: “Don’t make the mistake of thinking it’s just for boys, it’s perfect for any young reader. I only wish they had included Wonder Woman like the Comic does” (GeekyMom, 2010).

### **I Can Read.**

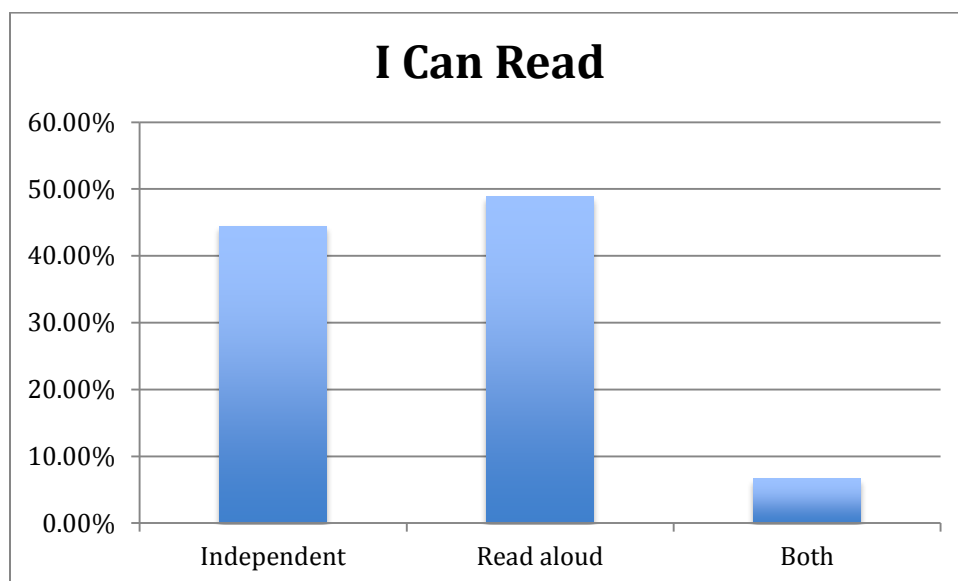
Thirty-three percent of reviews of books in Harper Collins’ I Can Read series discussed difficulty. While still a significant number, far fewer reviewers commented on difficulty in this series than in the previous two series. Seventy-eight percent of reviews that discussed difficulty asserted that I Can Read books were simple, and all of these reviews considered simplicity a positive trait. I Can Read books had the highest percentage of reviews asserting difficulty, with 22% of reviews claiming that the books were difficult.

Table 6:



Almost 50% of reviewers of I Can Read books reported that the stories were used primarily as read aloud material. Unlike the World of Reading and Step into Reading series, slightly more reviews reported use of the books as read aloud material than as independent reading material. It is possible that this difference in use is connected to difficulty. World of Reading and Step into Reading both received lower average difficulty scores (15.3 and 17.6, respectively) than the I Can Read series, with an average score of 21. The same traits that make books in the I Can Read series more difficult for beginning readers (longer sentences, dialogue, changes in location) also potentially make them more engaging read aloud materials.

Table 7:



Sixty nine percent of reviews that commented on engagement asserted that the books were engaging. Eight percent of reviews discussed the portrayal of positive values, including teamwork, as important factors. Only 2 reviews mentioned that the books were non violent, and a single review of *I am Wonder Woman* mentioned scariness, writing that the book was not scary. Because the I Can Read series was the only series to feature a female hero as a primary character, this series had more comments about female role models than any other series.

The children engaging with the superhero stories in this study were overwhelmingly male. Of the 266 total reviews that specified the sex of the child reader, 217, or 81%, reported male readers, and 49 (19%) reported female readers. Of these 49 female readers, 32 were reported in reviews for *Wonder Woman: I am Wonder Woman*, part of the I Can Read series. *I am Wonder Woman* was the only superhero leveled



reader that the researcher could locate, by any publisher, featuring a female hero as the main character.

All of the reviews that discussed positive female role models came from books in the I Can Read series, *I am Wonder Woman* (13) and *Batman: Meet the Super Heroes* (1). Of the 14 reviews that discussed positive female role models, 13 indicated female children were reading the book. One review did not specify the child's sex. Strength was discussed in 5 reviews as the primary attribute that made Wonder Woman a role model. Two reviewers described giving *I am Wonder Woman* to 3-year-old girls who had not had any previous interest in superheroes, as a way to challenge princess culture. One wrote: "I like that this book gives her the idea that princesses can be tough if they want to!" (Eakin, 2012).

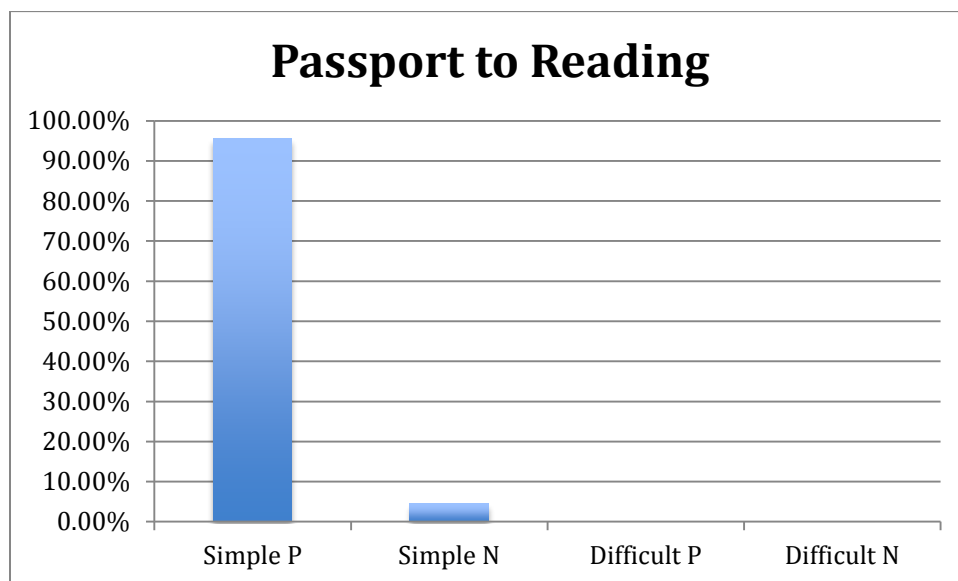
A total of 3 reviews indicated that Wonder Woman was *not* a positive role model. Two reviewers felt that her costume was inappropriate for young children. One wrote "My daughter kept asking me why Wonder Woman went around in public in her underwear with tall boots" (Cooley, 2013). Another reviewer felt that Wonder Woman was not the star of her own story. *I am Wonder Woman* has three pages that also include Superman and Batman. In one, Wonder Woman trains with them, in another, they fight a dragon together, and in the final page of the story Wonder Woman, Batman and Superman eat dinner together. The reviewer wrote that the action in the book was too understated and that "It also highlighted Superman and Batman and made Wonder Woman seem like a second rate team member instead of the 'star' of the book" (McGee, 2012).

Reviewers' discussions of female role models in the I Can Read series suggest that strong female heroes are appreciated and desired by a subset of readers, though they may be difficult to find.

### **Passport to Reading.**

Thirty-six percent of reviews of books in LB Kids' Passport to Reading series discussed difficulty. Though the Passport to Reading series received the highest average difficulty score in this study, at 23, no reviewers commented that they felt the book was difficult. Ninety-five percent of comments were coded Simple Positive, and only five percent Simple Negative.

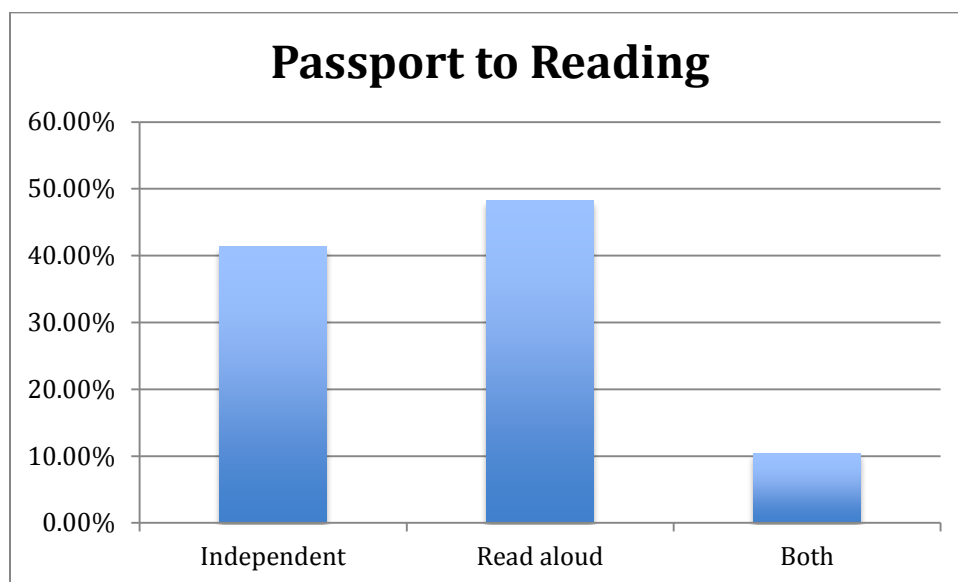
Table 8:



Forty-nine percent of reviews reported use of the books as read aloud material, and 41% reported use of the texts as independent reading. Like books in the I Can Read

series, books in the Passport to Reading series were used as read alouds more often than as independent reading.

Table 9:



Seventy-five percent of reviews that discussed engagement reported that books in the Passport to Reading series were engaging. Story length was again cited as a reason for lack of engagement with the story. While many reviewers praised the lack of violence in these stories, a lack of conflict was also cited as a reason for lack of engagement.

Two books from the Passport to Reading series, *Meet the Super Heroes* and *Meet the Villains of Villainville* had 52% of the total comments coded as Non Violent between them. These two books were introductions to the heroes and villains and their powers, and did not feature any physical contact between heroes and villains at all. For most reviewers, this was positive: “it’s great because he can learn about [the heroes] without

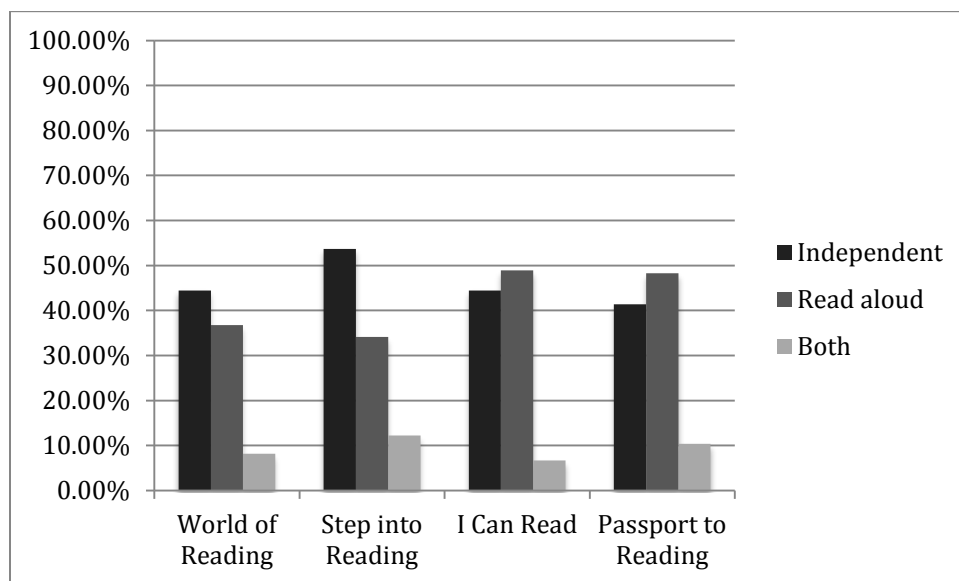
contact with any of the villains,” said one review of *Meet the Super Heroes* (Ramirez, 2011). But for one reviewer of the same book, the lack of contact caused a lack of engagement: “we like some fighting and some bad guys and...there is none to be found here” (DB, 2012).

Female role models, or their absence, were an important issue for many reviewers of books in the Passport to Reading series. Twelve percent of reviews for *Super Hero Squad: Meet the Super Heroes* commented on the negative portrayal of the book’s only female super hero. *Meet the Super Heroes* describes the powers of 18 superheroes, including the Invisible Woman. While most of the male heroes are depicted outside in an active role, Invisible Woman appears in a kitchen, partially invisible, pouring sugar in to a saltshaker. Many comments expressed anger that the book’s only female character was portrayed indoors, playing a trick on her own team. “If I hadn’t borrowed this book from the library, I’d be burning it right now,” wrote one reviewer (Kasya, 2013). Another wrote that her son had enjoyed the book, but that she had not, adding sarcastically “she is just how we like our women to be...invisible and in the kitchen” (mochichick, 2012).

### **A Comparison Across Series.**

Overall, there appears to be a connection between the difficulty scores for each series and its relative use as independent reading or read aloud material. Books in the World of Reading and Step into Reading series, which received the lowest difficulty scores, were used as independent reading material more often than as read aloud material. Books in the I Can Read and Passport to Reading series, which received higher difficulty scores, were used as read aloud material more often than as independent reading material.

Table 10:



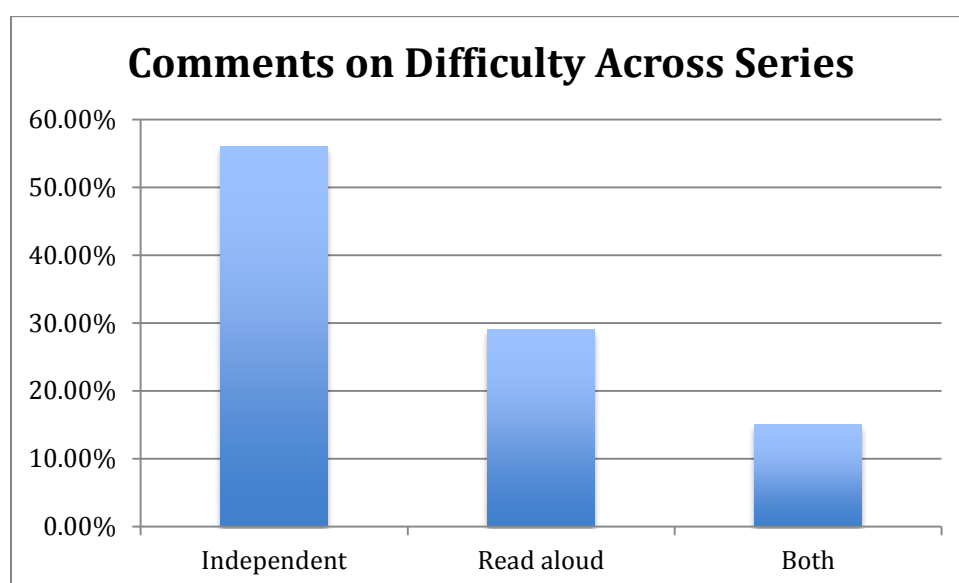
In general, series with lower difficulty scores also had a higher percentage of reviewers comment on difficulty.

Table 10:

Series	Average Difficulty Score	Percentage of Reviews Addressing Difficulty
World of Reading	15.3	66%
Step into Reading	17.6	58%
I Can Read	21	33%
Passport to Reading	23	36%

Across series, fifty-five percent of reviewers who stated that a child used the book for independent reading commented on difficulty, while only 29% of reviewers who stated that they used a book for reading aloud commented on difficulty. It is likely that for reviewers using books as read aloud material, other factors such as engagement and non-violence were more important than difficulty.

Table 11:



Though the small sample size and potential for coding bias make it problematic to generalize the results of this study, the results do suggest a connection between difficulty and use of easy readers about superheroes. Further research could lead to more information about the nature of this relationship.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

An analysis of 334 Amazon.com reviews for twelve superhero easy readers revealed that these books were being used as both independent reading material and as read alouds for pre-reading children. The ages of children described in the reviews ranged from 1.5 to 10, with 4 being the most commonly listed age. The presence of superheroes was a main factor for many reviewers in the purchase of, or enjoyment of, the text. Though difficulty was an important factor for many reviewers, engagement, appropriateness, and female role models emerged as other categories that were equally important, or more important than difficulty for some reviewers.

This study found a relationship between text difficulty and reviewers' use of the texts. Reviews that indicated use of the book as independent reading material commented on difficulty more often than those that indicated use of the book as read aloud material. Series that this study assigned overall higher difficulty scores had comparatively more uses as read aloud material than those that received lower difficulty scores. Qualities typically associated with easy readers, like brevity and simplicity, were cited by some reviews as the reason for a lack of engagement with the text. Other reviewers expressed the importance of non-violent, not scary stories and positive values. A subset of reviews expressed the importance of positive female role models, and several reviewers expressed a desire for more books featuring female heroes.

There appears to be very little research on fantasy and science fiction for beginning readers, and more research in this area could yield interesting results. Further

research on diversity in science fiction and fantasy stories for young children could also be valuable. Though no reviewers commented on a lack of diversity in the easy readers analyzed in this study, heroes presented in these easy readers were overwhelmingly white males. Even token female characters and characters of color were somewhat rare. Books analyzed from the I Can Read and World of Reading series featured exclusively white heroes. In the Step into Reading series, one member of the DC Super Friends, Green Lantern, is African American. Passport to Reading's *Meet the Super Hero Squad* also features a single African American hero called Falcon.

Even more problematic, from the researcher's perspective, was the description of Villainville in *Meet the Villains of Villainville* from the Passport to Reading series. On the opening page, we are told that the Super Hero Squad lives in Super Hero City, a brightly colored city of skyscrapers. The illustration on the next page shows a dark, urban street lined with broken-down wooden houses. Grass grows in cracks in the sidewalk, and a dirty car with a broken headlight drives past. The text reads: "The skies are always stormy in Villainville. The homes need to be fixed, and no one cares about the rules" (Rosen, 3). This illustration clearly equates villainy with urban poverty. The villains themselves are shown in a stone room with a giant computer, and not on the streets of the city where the homes need to be fixed. Many reviewers contended that superheroes are important positive role models for children. That makes the equation of heroism with white male affluence in these easy readers particularly problematic. Librarians and teachers should be conscious of this trend in superhero easy readers, and collect stories with diverse heroes whenever they can be found.



This exploratory study has several potential implications for children's librarians. Many reviewers discussed the role of these superhero stories in encouraging reading. That gives these books an important place in the library collection. Because many caregivers appear to be using these easy readers as read alouds, they might be judging the books by different criteria than the ones typically used by librarians when selecting easy readers. By acquiring books at various levels of complexity, collecting books that feature diverse heroes, and creating reading lists, librarians can help families select the right superhero stories for their needs.

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## Appendix A

### Easy Reader Data Collection Instrument

Coder Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title and Author:

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#### Book and Text Features

Number of pages of story text: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = 1-16 pages  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = 17-29 pages  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 = 30+ pages

Size of print: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = Large (14+ font)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = Medium (10 to 13pt font)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 = Small (<10pt font)

Spaces between words and between lines: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = well defined  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = not well defined

Presence of organizational features such as headings,  
 a table of contents, indexes: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = no use of these features  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = use of these features

Types of punctuation: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = simple (period, comma, question and  
 quotation marks)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = complex (full range of punctuation)

Number of illustrations to amount of text: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = illustrations on every page  
 or every other page  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = less than 1 every 2 pages

Placement of illustrations: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = never overlap with text  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = overlap with text on some pages  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 = overlap with text on all pages

Relationship of illustrations to print: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = primarily symmetrical  
 word/picture relationships  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = primarily complementary or  
 enhancing word/picture relationships  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 = primarily counterpointing or

contradictory word/picture  
relationships

Text structure: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = Simple narrative or expository  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = Complex narrative or expository

Total score for text features: \_\_\_\_\_

### Language and Literary Features

Perspective or point of view: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = Whole text from perspective of one  
 character  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = Text from perspectives of multiple  
 characters

Language structure: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = Simple sentences only  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = Presence of complex sentences

Literary devices: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = Not present  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = Present

Syllables in words: \_\_\_\_\_ 1 = 0-5 multisyllabic words on first page of text  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 = 6-10 multisyllabic words on first page of text  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 = >10 multisyllabic words on first page of text

Total score for language and literary features: \_\_\_\_\_

Combined score: \_\_\_\_\_

### Story Features

Are female superheroes present? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes  
 \_\_\_\_\_ No

## Appendix B

# Amazon.com Review Data Collection Instrument

Book Title:\_\_\_\_\_

Series: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Coder Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Review Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Stars Assigned: \_\_\_\_\_

Age of Child or Children: \_\_\_\_\_ or Not Specified

Sex of Child or Children \_\_\_\_\_ or Not Specified

Read aloud or Independent?	Read aloud
	Independent
	Both
	Not Specified

Is the child a reluctant reader?	Yes
	No
	Not Specified

Did the book generate an interest in reading?	Yes
	No
	Not Specified

Did the child have an interest in superheroes prior to reading the book?	Yes
	No
	Not Specified

Comments on Text: Simple P  
Simple N  
Difficult P  
Difficult N  
Not Specified

Comments on Illustrations:

Engaging

Not Engaging

Scary

Positive Female Role Model



Negative Female Role Model  
Not Specified

Comments on Story: Engaging  
Not Engaging  
Non Violent  
Scary  
Not Scary  
Positive Values  
Positive Female Role Model  
Negative Female Role Model  
Not Specified

URL: \_\_\_\_\_